

Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature

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1 IDEAS OF HISTORY IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE

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Conceptions of History

It is a well-known fact that with the single exception of the *Rājataranṅiṇī* (History of Kāshmīr) there is no historical text in Sanskrit dealing with the whole or even parts of India. But ideas of history and historical literature were not altogether lacking. Such literature, in an embryonic form, may be traced in the *Nārāśaṃsī* or hero-lauds which formed an essential feature in the preparatory ceremonies of the year-long celebration of horse-sacrifice. Ten days were devoted to this, 'whereby the nobility and great deeds of kings were sung by priest and warrior musicians . . . while the recitation of legends in verse accompanied various events of life'.¹

The first definite and comprehensive pronouncement on *Itihāsa* or history is to be found in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya which is believed by many to have been written in the third century B.C., but may be of somewhat later date, about the beginning of the Christian era. The relevant passage is as follows: 'The three Vedas, Sāma, Rik and Yajus, constitute the triple Vedas. These together with Atharva-veda and the *Itihāsa-veda* are (known as) the Vedas.' (Bk. I, Ch. III.)²

In the next chapter but one, *Itihāsa* is defined as: 'Purāṇa, Itivṛtta, Ākhyāvikā, Udāharaṇa, Dharmaśāstra, and Arthaśāstra are (known by the name) *Itihāsa*.' (Bk. I, Ch. V.)

A careful consideration of these two passages leads to the following important conclusions:

1. *Itihāsa* was given a very high rank in the domain of knowledge. Its recognition as the fifth Veda invested it with almost a sacrosanct character, and in any case placed it higher than any other branch of literature that developed after the Veda.

2. Although the term '*Itihāsa*' is now regarded as equivalent to 'history', it was used at this period in a very different or rather more comprehensive sense.

3. *Itihāsa* included within its scope a variety of subjects specifically

¹ *The Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge, 1922), i, 255.

² *Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra*, tr. by Shamasastri (Bangalore, 1915), pp. 7, 11.

named in the second passage. It is difficult to define precisely the original nature of each of these, but we may obtain a general idea by briefly discussing what was actually understood by them in ancient India:

i. The *Purāṇa* is the name of a well-known class of texts, traditionally eighteen in number, which did not assume their present form till long after the Christian era. But it is likely that they were all ultimately derived from, and were really various redactions of, one original *Purāṇa* text, or a genus of literature, in the nature of a compilation of tales, anecdotes, songs and lore that had come down through the ages. According to the tradition preserved in some of the existing *Purāṇa* texts, the original *Purāṇa* was compiled from these materials by Vyāsa who taught this and the *Itihāsa* to a disciple of his. After that he composed the *Mahābhārata*. So *Purāṇa* in the passage of *Arthaśāstra* quoted above, may be taken to denote tales and anecdotes handed down from old days, rather than a *Purāṇa* text of the existing type.

ii. *Itivṛtta* is translated by Shamasastri as 'history', but taken by Ganapati Sastri to mean the Epics.³ This latter interpretation is opposed to the Purāṇic tradition which, as we have seen above, distinguishes *Itihāsa* from the Epics. *Itivṛtta* literally means occurrence or event, and possibly denotes the traditional account of men and things of the times that are past, and thus makes the nearest approach to what we understand now by history.

iii. *Ākhyāvikā* means anecdotes and stories, but as the *Purāṇa* also denotes the same thing, it must have some distinctive characteristics. Ganapati Sastri renders it as an account of divine and human beings.⁴

iv. *Udāharaṇa*, meaning example, most probably refers to typical stories, biographies or events which illustrated some important moral principles or political precepts. Ganapati Sastri's rendering⁵—*nyāya* and *mīmāṃsā*—is hardly acceptable.

v–vi. *Dharmaśāstra* and *Arthaśāstra*, though taken by Ganapati Sastri as the well-known texts of these two classes,⁶ possibly refer to the subject-matter dealt with by them, rather than any specific texts.

It would thus appear that *Itihāsa*, as understood by Kauṭilya, not only included historical chronicles in the widest sense of the term, but many things more, and may be said to comprise almost all the topics concerning a man outside the sphere of religion. It seems to embrace the study not only of historical persons and events, but also of traditions concerning them, the political, social, moral and economic theories and their practical applications, legal usages and institutions, etc. The great epic *Mahābhārata*, in its extant form, closely corresponds to this type of *Itihāsa*.

That this comprehensive idea of *Itihāsa* persisted down to a very late age is indicated by two verses in the Jaina *Ādi Purāṇa* by Jinasena who

³ *Arthaśāstra*, ed. by Ganapati Sastri (Trivandrum, 1924), i, 35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

flourished in the ninth century A.D. These verses may be translated as follows: '*Itihāsa* is a very desirable subject. According to tradition it relates "what actually happened". It is also described as *itivr̥tta*, *aitihya*, and *āmnāya* (authentic tradition). It is also called *Ārsha* for it was composed by the ṛshis (sages), *Sūkta*, for it instructs through good and pleasant discourses, and *Dharmaśāstra*, for it prescribes *dharma* (religion or moral principles).'

In the course of time some of the constituent elements of history such as the *Purāṇa*, *Arthaśāstra*, and *Dharmaśāstra* developed into independent subjects of study. The connotation of *Itihāsa* accordingly underwent a great change, and was practically narrowed down to a record of past events or occurrences. But still the influence of the old and comprehensive idea is clearly seen in the following standard definition of *Itihāsa*: '*Itihāsa* means past events accompanied by or arranged in the form of stories (*kathāvuktam*), and conveying instruction in *dharma* (morals), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire) and *mokṣa* (salvation)',⁸ i.e. the four ultimate ends of a human being.

Collection of Materials

We may now proceed to discuss the attitude of the ancient Indians towards history, as properly understood today, viz. a true record of kings and historical events, arrived at by a correct appraisal of all available materials, and arranged in chronological order, with a description of the social, political, and economic conditions from age to age.

The first requisite for this was a framework of political history. The necessity or importance of this seems to have been fully realized even at a very early period. In any event we find that the idea of collecting materials for a chronicle of kings appealed to the Indians even in remote antiquity. This is evident from the functions of the *Sūtas* and *Māgadhas*, as explained in the *Purāṇas*. Thus the *Vāyu Purāṇa* says: 'The *Sūta*'s special duty, as perceived by good men of old, was to preserve the genealogies of gods, ṛshis (sages) and most glorious kings, and the traditions of great men, which are displayed by those who declare sacred lore in the *Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas*.' The *Sūtas* are often classed with *Māgadhas*, and both of them are regarded as royal panegyrists, though in one passage the *Sūta* is called a *Paurāṇika*, and the *Māgadha* a genealogist. Both of them are said to have come into existence in the time of the legendary king Pr̥thu. It is unnecessary for our present purpose to go into further details, but it is obvious that even in the most ancient days there was a separate class in society, whose function was to preserve chronicles of kings. Pargiter, who has gone

⁷ *Adi Purāṇa*, I, 24-5.

⁸ The verse is quoted in the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (s.v. *Itihāsa*), by V. S. Apte, second edition (Bombay, 1912).

into this question more deeply than others, has justly pointed out that the *Sūtas* were engaged in the task of collecting these genealogies of kings, traditions, and ballads about celebrated men, etc., and all these were exactly the material out of which the *Purāṇa*, or rather that portion of it which deals with political history, was constructed at a later date.⁹ Some of these old genealogies have been preserved in the *Purāṇa* texts, but many have been lost. Pargiter has drawn up a comparative table of the lists of kings of twenty different dynasties given in the different *Purāṇas*.¹⁰ The list begins with Manu, from whom descended all the kings throughout India, and comes down, after about one hundred generations, to historical times. In some cases the names of nearly all the hundred kings are preserved fairly well, but in others there are many gaps. The list is continued, in some cases, even after this, and in the case of Magadha it is brought down to the period just before the commencement of the Imperial Guptas. We also possess similar lists of kings, with regnal periods, of important dynasties like the Sātavāhanas. Wherever we can check these lists with the help of independent data—and this is true only of the period after 500 B.C.—we find that the lists were based on genuine records, though errors, sometimes of a serious nature, crept in in course of time. The discrepancies among the various *Purāṇas*, and sometimes among the different manuscripts of one and the same *Purāṇa*, indicate that these errors were largely due to copyists of *Purāṇa* texts.

From the time of the Imperial Guptas, such lists disappear from our literary records save those noted below. Several circumstances account for this. In the first place the proper organization of royal archives probably made the work of the *Sūtas* redundant, and in any case they ceased to function in their old capacity. It is clearly stated that the *Sūtas* now took to two other occupations, namely (1) employment with a Kṣatriya in connection with chariots, elephants, and horses, and (2) medicine.

That the royal archives kept the genealogical list is quite clear from epigraphic records where we get stereotyped lists of kings of some dynasties for generations together, and in some cases, with regnal years, exactly as in the *Purāṇas*. But the royal archives, which shared the fortunes of the royal dynasties, were liable to destruction more often and more completely than the accounts of the *Sūtas*. For these *Sūtas* were many in number, and several members of the class would do the work in their own ways (like the authors of *Kulajis* in medieval Bengal), and these would be copied by their successive generations. Further, these accounts, written on small palm-leaves, easily portable from one place to another, were preserved in humble cottages, less likely to suffer destruction from political causes than palaces or big chancelleries, and being private properties were likely to be more cared for than official records, particularly when they ceased to be

⁹ F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (London, 1922), p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

of any practical use. A stage of further degradation in the position of the *Sūtas* is reflected in the *Manu Smṛti* which says that the *Sūtas* and *Māgadhas* were low castes, born of Kṣatriya fathers and Brāhmaṇa mothers, i.e. offspring of the condemned *pratiloma* marriage, and they are classed with the despised *Caṇḍalas*. The management of horses and chariots was the occupation of the *Sūtas*, and trade that of the *Māgadhas*.

Secondly, the *Purāṇas* came to be regarded as sacred books of hoary antiquity, and the inclusion of new royal genealogies was stopped, probably because they would be regarded as signs of modernity and thus take away the ancient and sacred character of these works. Though, therefore, some *Sūtas* might still record the genealogies, these would lose their importance and, not being included in the *Purāṇas*, would cease to be cared for and gradually be lost.

But the idea of keeping regular chronicles of kings did not altogether disappear in India, and we find the practice continued in Nepāl, Kāshmīr, Gujarāt and a few other places.

The *Vaṃśāvalīs* of Nepāl are replicas of Purāṇic genealogical lists, and some at least of the old works from which Kalhaṇa derived material for his history were probably of the same character. The Jain *Prabandhas* and historical works, quite large in number, vouch for the existence of the same type of chronicles in Gujarāt. There were probably similar chronicles in Sindh, on which *Chachnāma* was based, and the Assam *Buraṅjis* of a later period partook of the same character. It may be pure accident, but it is none the less very curious, that this old practice should continue only in the outlying districts of Northern India. This was, no doubt, partly due to the fact that Nepāl, Kāshmīr, Gujarāt and Assam, where such chronicles have been actually preserved, were precisely the localities which suffered the least destruction from the ravages of Muslim invasions, and therefore were able to preserve what was lost in other places due to this calamity. There may be other reasons also. But in any case it is obvious that the old tradition of keeping chronicles of kings was not altogether lost in India.

The existence of such chronicles is indirectly proved by casual references in literature to kings of various ages and countries, by way of illustrating some ethical principles of political doctrines such as we find for example in the Kauṭīliya *Arthaśāstra*, *Harṣa-carita*, and other works. As many of these royal names and events recorded about them are not to be found in the *Purāṇas*, Epics, and other books, the knowledge was presumably derived from such chronicles.

Other Historical Records

But it is not merely the genealogy and chronicles of kings, but also other materials of history that received due attention from Indians. This is clear from the duties assigned to the *Gopa* in the Kauṭīliya *Arthaśāstra*. As an

official in charge of five to ten villages, it was his duty to keep a record of everything concerning a village including its trade and agricultural products. He had to register the total number of the inhabitants in each village, specifying the caste and profession of each, and also to 'keep an account of the number of young and old men that reside in each house, their history (*carita*), occupation, income and expenditure'. These registers were regularly checked by other officers who independently collected information through spies.¹¹ These materials would supply invaluable data for the purpose of social and economic history.

Such a genuine anxiety on the part of the state to keep historical records in a proper manner is also vouched for by Hsüan Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, who travelled for nearly fifteen years almost all over India, during the first half of the seventh century A.D. In the course of his general description of India he observes: 'With respect to the records of events, each province has its own official for preserving them in writing. The record of these events in their full character is called Ni-lo-pi-cha. In these records are mentioned good and evil events, with calamities and fortunate occurrences.'¹²

Historical Biographies

Akin to chronicles, but differing from them both in object and spirit, as well as in literary forms, are the biographies of famous kings written by contemporaries. The most famous specimens are *Harṣa-carita* in prose, and *Gauḍa-vaho*, *Navasāhasāṅka-carita*, *Vikramāṅka deva-carita*, *Kumārāpāla-carita*, *Rāma-carita*, *Prthvī-rāja-vijaya*, *Somapāla-vilāsa*, and a host of other works in verse. These contain valuable materials for history, but can hardly claim the rank of historical works. For, in the first place, the object steadily kept in view by these authors was to eulogize, rather than to give a true and impartial account of, the kings who were in most cases their patrons. Secondly, the authors cared more for literary effect than a delineation of facts, and hence their work was dominated by irrelevant topics or objects of minor importance which proved more susceptible to poetic treatment and literary embellishment than dry historical facts and events. The *Harṣa-carita*, for example, though written in prose, contains mostly rhetorical descriptions and literary embellishments, and though it consists of more than 250 printed pages, it covers only the first few months of the reign of Harṣa, and all the events of any historical importance contained in this work would not take more than a dozen pages, and hardly even that. The next three works mentioned above are undoubtedly more historical in character, though suffering from the same defects. The four

¹¹ R. Shamasastri, op. cit., pp. 178-9.

¹² *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, tr. by S. Beal (London, 1906), i, 78. Slightly different is the translation of Watters (*On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (London, 1904), i, 154).

other works show still further progress in historical conception. Among these, *Rāma-carita* (twelfth century A.D.) is undoubtedly the best from the historical point of view. Although, as its name implies, it was primarily intended to be a biography of Rāmapāla, it gives a brief account of his two predecessors and successors. Excluding the artificiality of the style, in which each verse is made to have two entirely different meanings, it may be regarded as a good specimen of historical work delineating contemporary events without much unnecessary embellishment. It describes in detail the great rebellion against the Pālas, of which we know practically nothing from any other source. Though extremely limited in character, both in regard to time and locality, it is a fairly good specimen of objective treatment of history.

The *Kumārapāla-carita*, a more extensive work, gives a good account of the Caulukyās, especially of Kumārapāla. But it was written to illustrate the rules of Sanskrit and Prākṛit grammar, and contains long moral and religious discourses, typically Jaina in character.

We have not only biographies of kings, but also of other important historical personages. Typical examples are furnished by the *Kīrtikaumudī* of Someśvaradeva, and *Sukṛtasamkīrtana* of Arisimha, both of which delineate the life and character of Vastupāla, the minister of Gujarāt (thirteenth century A.D.). In the introductory portion Someśvaradeva gives a brief account of the Caulukya rulers from Mūlarāja, the founder of the dynasty (tenth century), up to his own time.

Collection of Historical Narratives

Another class of works making a nearer approach to history is the *Prabandha* or a collection of historical narratives. The best specimen is perhaps the *Prabandha-cintāmaṇi* (Wishing-stone of narratives) by Merutuṅga, composed in A.D. 1306. It devotes a short section each to a large number of topics, and many of these deal with well-known kings. Some of the prefatory remarks of the author are significant for our present purpose. By way of explaining his object in writing this work, he remarks: 'Ancient stories, because they have been so often heard, do not delight so much the minds of the wise; therefore I compose this work out of the life-histories of men not far removed from my own time.'¹³ Equally interesting is his statement that the materials of his work were collected from a number of prose narratives, exceeding a hundred, and that he was assisted in this work by Dharmadeva. More significant is the concluding verse in the introductory portion. Though somewhat obscure it seems to imply that since many different persons wrote on the same topics, there are bound to be differences among them, but the author has tried to select the best views and hence

¹³ Tr. by C. H. Tawney (Calcutta, 1901), p. 2.

does not deserve condemnation from those who happened to take a different view.¹⁴

These statements undoubtedly indicate a truly historical mind, but unfortunately the work itself cannot be regarded as of great historical value. For example, in his account of historical persons like Lakṣmaṇasena and Jayacandra, he only mentions some silly stories about them. He tells us a mythical story to explain the success of the Yavanas (Muslims) against the latter, but makes no reference to the defeat and flight of the former. What is more strange, he does not even mention the sack of Somanātha. When he composed his work, Alā'-ud-dīn Khiljī had begun his career of conquest, and had already overrun Gujarāt. But there is no echo of these momentous events in his voluminous work.

Collections of biographies of Jaina teachers form another type of historical literature found in Gujarāt. The best specimens are Hemacandra's *Parīśiṣṭaparvan* (twelfth century) and the *Prabhāvaka-carita* (thirteenth century), which incidentally refer to names of kings and events of their reign.

The Method of Writing History

The existence of the works referred to in the last two sections does, to a certain extent, blunt the edge of the reproach frequently directed against Sanskrit literature, that, with the single exception of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, there is to be found in it no work meriting the title of history.¹⁵ This view, expressed by C. H. Tawney, merely echoes the opinion by Bühler in a letter written to Nöldeke in 1877. Referring to some of the works mentioned above, he says, 'You are a little behind the age with your notion that the Indians have no historical literature. In the last twenty years, five fairly voluminous works have been discovered, emanating from authors contemporary with the events which they describe.'¹⁶

While there is a great deal of truth in these statements, it should be clearly pointed out that the works under review do not reach the standard which entitles them to be ranked as 'historical' in the proper sense of the term. They are limited in their objects, eulogistic in character, rhetorical or poetic in style, and aiming more at edification and entertainment than a statement of positive facts. While biographies are mostly panegyrics, the main objects of the Jain chronicles 'were to edify the Jain community (and) to convince them of the glory and power of the Jain religion'.¹⁷ But there are good grounds for believing that a true conception of history and the correct method of writing it were not altogether unknown in India. This is proved by the remarkable utterances of Kalhaṇa, by way of introductory remarks, at the commencement of his justly famous historical work *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. The mission of a historian, says he, is to 'make vivid before

¹⁴ Durgasankar Sastri's Edition (Bombay), p. i.

¹⁵ Tawney, op. cit., p. v.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. vi.

one's eyes pictures of a bygone age' (v. 4).¹⁸ In this respect history is more potent than the mythical ambrosia, for while the latter gives immortality to a single individual (who drinks it), a true history immortalizes a number of great men as well as the historian (v. 3).¹⁹ Kalhaṇa had a highly developed, almost modern, conception of the proper data or sources of history. He not only made a thorough study of all previous writings on the history of Kāshmir, but also consulted the original sources. 'By the inspection', says he, 'of ordinances (*śāsana*) of former kings relating to religious foundations and grants, laudatory inscriptions (*praśasti-paṭṭa*) as well as written records (*śāstra*), all wearisome error has been set at rest.'²⁰ There is evidence to show that he studied coins and old monuments,²¹ two other well-known sources of history.

Kalhaṇa held that the first requisite of a true historian was to keep a detached mind, free from bias and prejudices. A historian, like a judge, says he, must discard love (*rāga*) and hatred (*dveṣa*) while recounting the events of the past, and he adds that such a writer alone deserves praise (v. 7).

Above all, Kalhaṇa had the supreme merit of possessing a critical mind and that spirit of scepticism which is the first virtue of a historian. He questioned the veracity of past historians, and examined their statements in the light of available evidence culled from the various sources mentioned above. He found fault with the pedantic style of Suvrata, who had acquired celebrity by epitomizing the voluminous works containing the early history of the kings of Kāshmir; he corrected the errors which Kṣemendra committed in his 'List of Kings' owing to an incomprehensible lack of care; and he scrutinized eleven works of former savants containing the annals of kings, as well as the views of the sage Nīla (vv. 11-14).

In conclusion he states the objective of his work which, in his opinion, was presumably also the objective of all historical works. 'This saga,' he says, 'which is properly made up should be useful for kings as a stimulant or as a sedative, like a physic, according to time and place' (v. 21). A wrong interpretation of this verse by Bühler led to much misunderstanding and undeserved condemnation of Kalhaṇa, but there seems to be little doubt that what Kalhaṇa means is that kings, both good and bad, should derive great profit from his great work. The fate of many kings narrated in it should teach healthy lessons to future kings whose success and prosperity make them insolent and overbearing; the fate of others should give hope and consolation to those who suffered defeat or were depressed by natural calamities or other adversities.²²

¹⁸ Tr. by R. S. Pandit (Allahabad, 1935).

¹⁹ Ibid. (Cf. translation and comment in footnotes.)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A. B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 162.

²² Cf. footnotes to Pandit's Translation.

This detailed reference to Kalhaṇa would indicate that Indians possessed most advanced views on the ideals of history and the proper method of writing it. His anxiety for a critical appraisal of existing works in the light of original sources, including archival and epigraphic records, would do credit to a historian of the twentieth century. The solicitude shown by him for an impartial outlook on the events of history, like that of a judge and not a lawyer, is one of the most remarkable traits in his character. The value of this can be judged if we remember that even in the eighteenth century A.D., Johnson, one of the greatest intellects of England, when composing Parliamentary Debates, saw to it 'that the Whig dogs should not have the best of it'.²³ Kalhaṇa's ideal of history, viz., a vivid representation of the past with its great role as an instructor of future generations, was not perhaps an individual opinion but really a general view. This may be presumed from his confident exclamation, 'What man of culture is there to whose heart such a connected narrative dealing with innumerable incidents of the remote past will not appeal?'²⁴ Incidentally it proves a general appreciation of historical literature.

The actual performance of a writer hardly ever comes up to his own ideal, and Kalhaṇa was no exception to this rule. Imbued as we are with modern rational ideas, we are struck by his many failings and imperfections. It is easy to draw a line between the first three chapters and the rest of the work. The earlier kings dealt with in the first three chapters were mostly mythical or legendary, and even where historical persons were concerned Kalhaṇa had evidently no reliable material for their history. If he had been true to the principles he himself preached and largely acted upon in subsequent chapters, he would have pleaded his ignorance and omitted their accounts. Instead, he has accepted the old traditions, even to the absurd length of assigning a reign of three hundred years to a single king. This is probably due, not so much to his lack of critical spirit as to a blind faith in the Epics and *Purāṇas*, and consequently to the old traditions contained in them, the truth or falsity of which could not be tested by any positive evidence. The orthodox belief in the sanctity of the *Dvāpara* Age, to which the normal rules of the *Kali* Age do not apply, had possibly something to do with this abnormal attitude of Kalhaṇa. But whatever may be the true explanation, the fact is there, and the best possible apology for the author has been expressed by S. P. Pandit in the following words:

'Probably Kalhaṇa himself did not expect or even desire that the same credence should be given to the whole of his narrative in all its details in the first three *Taraṅgas* (chapters) which he expected as of right in favour of the dates and events of the subsequent, and especially the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth *Taraṅgas*. He clearly indicates now and

²³ Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (London, 1900), i, 103.

²⁴ V. 22, Pandit's Translation.

then, that as we go back towards antiquity the story becomes more and more traditional and then even legendary, and that as you approach modern times it assumes a truly historical character with as correct details as you can expect in a work of the kind based upon materials like those which were available to him.’²⁵

Modern historians may easily point to several other defects of a general nature which influence even the later portions which are otherwise so admirable. These may be briefly summed up as belief in witchcraft and magic feats, occasional explanation of events as due to the influence of fate or wrath of gods rather than to any rational cause, and a general didactic tendency inspired by Hindu views of doctrines of *karma* and transmigration. But it must be noted that most of these failings he shares in common with practically all the historians of medieval ages. Lastly, in common with most of them, Kalhaṇa subscribed to the view that even a historical text must be a work of art. He exercised his undoubted poetical talents of a very high quality in order to make his work attractive to readers, but his wonderful moderation in this respect would be clearly manifest to anyone who compares the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, from this point of view, with *Harṣa-carita*, *Gauḍa-vaho*, and *Vikramāṅka deva-carita*. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* certainly does not conform to the modern notion that history should be written on strictly scientific lines without any consideration of its literary representation. But this ideal, which was prominently put forward only a century ago, is already losing favour, and a gradually increasing number hold the view that history should be both a science and an art—scientific in its method of interpreting materials and making inferences, but artistic in the representation of the results of such study. Kalhaṇa may be said to have followed this standard, so far at least as his last five chapters are concerned, which cover nearly five-sixths of his entire work.

These chapters more or less conform to the high ideals preached by Kalhaṇa, subject to the general defects mentioned above. A spirit of detachment in judging of men and events, and an attempt to be strictly impartial are clearly manifest in his denunciation of the follies and crimes of his ideal king, Lalitāditya, and in delineating the wicked character and cruelties of Harṣa under whom his own father served as minister. His accuracy of historical details, a sound knowledge of topography, and vigorous delineation of the character of historical personages, would do credit to any distinguished historian, even of the present age. On the whole, considering both his merits and defects, even a modern historian should have little hesitation in ranking Kalhaṇa as a great historian, one that would easily take his place among the very best that the world could show before the nineteenth century, barring only such great geniuses as

²⁵ Introduction to *Gauḍa-vaho*. Quoted by R. S. Pandit, op. cit., p. 599.

Thucydides and Polybius, who stand apart and above the general class of historians even of their own countries.

Ideas of History

Having surveyed the different types of history we are now in a position to discuss the general problem concerning ideas of history in ancient India. As we have seen above, the idea of history, as a branch of knowledge, was at the beginning a very comprehensive one, but gradually some of its important aspects developed into separate and independent subjects like *Arthaśāstra*, *Dharmaśāstra*, and *Purāṇa*. That part of it which was concerned with genealogy and chronicles of kings, and events of a political nature, and thus makes the nearest approach to our modern conception of history, became by itself an independent subject, under such names as *Itivṛtta*, *Itihāsa*, etc. It is highly likely that separate works, dealing with this subject alone, existed in ancient times, but we have no actual specimen of such works, and all that we know of them has survived only as a chapter in the extensive *Purāṇa* texts, whose authors must have freely drawn upon these works. So far as can be judged from these extant summaries the historical works were more or less of the nature of chronicles which recorded the names of kings and their regnal years, and gave brief accounts of the events associated with their reigns. There were good collections of materials for compiling such chronicles, and even though the general practice of writing such political histories gradually declined, it never disappeared altogether. This is proved by the long royal genealogies contained in epigraphic records and some literary works, especially biographies of historical persons. Local chronicles have also been preserved in some parts of India, mostly outlying districts like Nepāl and Gujarāt.

We have thus definite proof of the existence of materials for political history. Of the other aspects of history, such as social and economic conditions of the people, we have reference to the collection of useful data for this purpose, and even incidental references to their utilization in treatises like Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, but there is no systematic book on the subject.

Not only were there materials for history, but the method of working them into a systematic treatise was not unknown either. Of course the method was very defective in many respects. The myths and legends were not always distinguished from historical facts, and not infrequently overburdened them. Sometimes historical events were treated merely as backgrounds for display of poetical skill, rhetorical display, or ethical maxims, and as a means of religious propaganda. Sometimes the ideal of history as an accurate delineation of past events was sacrificed in making it a source of entertainment.

But in spite of all these defects the ancient Hindus were not lacking in a

correct appreciation of the true ideals and methods of history. This is definitely proved by the general principles laid down by Kalhaṇa and his great work *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* to which detailed reference has been made above. Both in the theory and in its practical application Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* shows the high-water mark of historical knowledge reached by the ancient Hindus. Judged by any standard except the very modern one, the level of excellence attained by this work is very high, and though far inferior to three or four works of great genius, it can easily claim an honoured place among the historical works of ancient and medieval ages. In any case this one work is sufficient to prove that the ancient Hindus did not lack true historical sense, and there was no inherent defect in their mental outlook or intellectual development which rendered them incapable of producing good historical literature.

Absence of Historical Literature

Still the fact remains that except Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, which is merely a local history of Kāśhmīr, there is no other historical text in the whole range of Sanskrit literature which makes even a near approach to it, or may be regarded as history in the proper sense of the term. This is a very strange phenomenon, for there is hardly any branch of human knowledge or any topic of human interest which is not adequately represented in Sanskrit literature. The absence of real historical literature is therefore naturally regarded as so very unusual that even many distinguished Indians cannot bring themselves to recognize the obvious fact, and seriously entertain the belief that there were many such historical texts, but that they have all perished. The great political leader, Surendranath Banerji, the father of Indian nationalism, gave an eloquent expression to this view in his usual oratorical manner, more than eighty years ago, and many have since followed suit.

It is true that many historical texts have perished beyond recovery. Apart from general consideration, this is clearly borne out by the fact that, with one exception, the large number of historical texts to which Kalhaṇa had access, as noted above, are no longer available.

But it should be remembered that the loss of historical chronicles in Kāśhmīr is undoubtedly due, in a large measure, to the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* itself which superseded them and, to ordinary readers, rendered them superfluous. An analogous instance is furnished by Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*. It refers to many previous works on the subject which have entirely disappeared, presumably because nobody cared to read them after the masterly treatise of Kauṭilya was composed. It is, therefore, legitimate to hold that when a good literary work superseded previous texts on the subject, the latter were no longer studied and therefore fell into disuse and perished, in most cases, beyond recovery. Even apart from such reasons, individual

works are liable to perish. This is proved by the chance discovery of a unique manuscript of *Rāma-carita* in Nepāl. But it is difficult to support the generally accepted view that literary texts of the type of *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, or something like it, treating the history of India as a whole, or parts of it, were actually composed in ancient India.

A little reflection would convince anybody of the error of this view. In the first place, it would be strange indeed that ravages of men and nature should have marked as special victims only the standard literary works on history, and that also in such a thorough manner that only a single representative work remains to tell the tale of this wholesale destruction. Individual volumes might have been lost, but it would be nothing short of a miracle if an entire branch of literature had perished beyond recovery. Secondly, there is a complete absence of reference to any such historical work in the vast Sanskrit literature still extant. No text of the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya was found till the beginning of the present century, but the existence of this book was known through quotations or references in later literature. There are many Sanskrit texts and commentaries which refer to old kings, but there is not the least reference to any historical work containing accounts of them. The ignorance of the careers of, and the absence of even any casual reference to, distinguished emperors, like Samudragupta, Candragupta and Skandagupta, Pulakeśi, Nāgabhaṭa and a host of other rulers and personages of eminence, in Sanskrit literature, may be regarded as almost decisive factors in reaching a conclusion on the point.

Thirdly, Kalhaṇa was a conscientious writer and must have taken all possible steps to acquaint himself with the history of the country, but although some of his heroes like Lalitāditya and Jayāpīḍa played a dominant part in Northern India, he does not seem to have known anything about its history. It is obvious that he had no access to any text dealing with the history of Northern India before his time.

Those who do not subscribe to the theory of wholesale destruction are faced with a singularly difficult problem. Why did the Hindu intellect, which was capable of writing the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, shrink from similar attempts to write the history of India as a whole, or, even if that idea were too ambitious, of the mighty empires that rose and fell in different parts of India? Various explanations have been offered, but they would hardly bear scrutiny. We have space here to refer to only a few of them, such as peculiarities of Indian psychology which denied any meaning or value to history, the absence of national sentiment, and the lack of that scientific attitude of mind which seeks to find natural causes for events of nature.

As regards the first, it will suffice to state that historical chronicles of an elementary or romantic type existed in large numbers, and it is difficult to conceive of a psychological state of mind in which men revel at the delineation of historical persons and events in a crude form, but shrink

from giving it a developed literary form or a truly historical shape, which was not altogether foreign to them.

It has been urged that national feeling, roused by a foreign invasion, is a powerful aid to the writing of history; the example of Greece shows that it is evoked mostly in democratic states, and was therefore not noticeable in India to the same measure. We know really too little of Indian history to form a definite conclusion on this point, but the prolonged resistance of confederate democratic states of North Bihār against the growing power of Magadha, the stubborn and heroic opposition of democratic peoples in the Punjab and Afghanistan against Alexander, and the successful fight of the Mālavas, Yaudheyas and other republican states against the foreign conquerors of a later date, do not seem to have been taken into consideration in formulating such a theory.

As regards scientific attitude, it is necessary to point out that both Herodotus and Thucydides flourished in an age when the Greek military operations were guided by the position of the sun and moon, and the superstitious belief in the effect of an eclipse caused a disastrous defeat in the Peloponnesian War; when Anaxagoras was condemned to death by the General Assembly of Athens because he denied that the sun and moon were divine beings; when the study of astronomy was forbidden, and the Athenian democracy forced Socrates to put an end to his life by poison for 'not worshipping the gods whom the city worships'. If we remember that Āryabhaṭa, who discovered the true causes of eclipse, the rotatory motion of the earth round the sun, and many other brilliant scientific truths, flourished in an age which has been compared to the Periclean age of Athens for its intellectual and artistic achievement, but which produced no historical literature, we can hardly explain the absence of history in India by the absence of a scientific attitude of mind.

As a matter of fact the various theories put forward to explain the absence of history in India fail to take note of the fact that the problem that we have to solve is not the lack of historical writings, of which we have a fair number of specimens, but the absence of finished products like the *Rājataranginī*. There were historical writings about Kumārapāla and Vastupāla, about Rāmapāla, Vikramāditya VI, and Sindhurāja, but no history of the Caulukyas, the Pālas, the later Cālukyas and the Paramāras. None of the extant theories can sufficiently explain this phenomenon. The obvious fact remains that India lacked neither historical materials nor historical chronicles, and even the popular demand for, or interest in, historical knowledge was not altogether absent, but still no other first-rate writer like Kalhaṇa appeared in this branch of literature. This fact seems to be more an accident than the result of any definite cause or causes. The absence of such a writer diminished, or led to the lack of, popular interest in history, and these two factors acted and reacted on each other.

It is interesting to note in this connection that Kalhaṇa had no less than four successors who carried the history of Kāshmir from the point where he left it to some years after its annexation by the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The spirit which was kindled by Kalhaṇa in Kāshmir led to historical works which have stood the test of time, and have not disappeared. The rise of eminent writers like him in other parts of India might have led to similar results, and it is the absence of this factor that seems to be the major cause for the absence of real history in India.